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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/28/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR GHEBREMESKEL DISCUSSES U.S.-
ERITREAN RELATIONS

Classified By: CDA Jennifer McIntyre for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Cable includes an action request for AF/E. See para ¶11.

¶2. (C) Summary: Charg d, Affaires met with the Director in the Office of the President Yemane Ghebremeskel on August 28, at his request, to discuss the status of the proposed phone call from Secretary Rice and to reiterate a proposal for a high-level Eritrean delegation to meet with the Secretary. Charg used the opportunity to raise concerns about the negative trends in our bilateral relations, discuss Eritrea,s role regionally and to urge the Eritreans to adopt a less provocative stance towards the U.S. Post requests AF guidance on responding to Ghebremeskel,s request for high level meetings in Washington. End Summary.

Call from the Secretary and Proposal for Meeting

¶3. (C) Ghebremeskel inquired about the status of the proposed call from Secretary Rice to President Isaias. Ghebremeskel noted that the President would be heavily engaged in meetings and staying in Massawa through part of the week but indicated that the President would be available for the call. Charg said that she believed that the call was still forthcoming. She would check with Washington and get back with him.

¶4. (C) Ghebremeskel stated that a high level visit with the Secretary in Washington would prove more useful and asked

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whether this would be possible. When asked who would represent the Eritreans and what would be the proposed topics for discussions if such a visit were to occur, Ghebremeskel replied that Yemane Ghebreab, Head of Political Affairs for the People,s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) would likely lead the delegation and topics would include the border, bilateral relations and regional issues such as Sudan and Somalia.

State of Bilateral Relations

15. (C) Charg stated her belief that under the present circumstances, a direct meeting with the Secretary was unlikely without concrete indications that the Eritreans wished to improve bilateral relations. In almost all areas, the U.S.-Eritrean relationship has become unproductive and communication with the GSE severely circumscribed. For example, the Ambassador has not had access to the President in over a year. Unhelpful actions run the gamut from the GSE's closing of USAID last fall, the removal of Western UNMEE monitors, cessation of military programs and exchanges, lack of access of Embassy personnel to government officials, as well as administrative obstacles placed on getting visas for official travelers and gaining permission to travel in-country.

16. (C) As recent examples of gratuitously provocative actions, Charg referred to an anti-American video clip which had been airing repeatedly on Eri-TV throughout the previous week, and a full page editorial in the Saturday edition of the Eritrea profile with the headline, &U.S. Policy Threatens War in Horn of Africa8. (Note: The TV clip was e-mailed to AF/E and AF/PD on August 25 and consists of a one-minute segment of President Bush speaking about democracy and tolerance juxtaposed against a series of images edited to illustrate U.S. military human rights abuses in Iraq. The newspaper editorial is one of several recently published blaming the unrest in Somalia on U.S. meddling. End note.) Ghebremeskel professed no knowledge of the TV clip and dismissed the newspaper editorial as an opinion piece. Charg noted that since the Eritrean Profile is the official news organ of the government, inclusion and prominence of such editorials are clearly with the government's approval. She also pointed to President Isaias, anti-American remarks during his Martyr's Day Speech in May and his recent speech

in Nakfa on August 24 blaming the U.S. administration for lack of progress on the border issue. (Reported previously in septels.)

17. (C) Ghebremeskel noted that even several years ago, when Eritrea was cooperating on a range of bilateral programs with the U.S., the U.S. had taken a number of negative actions. For example, Eritrea had not been included with five other countries as a recipient for regional U.S. counter-terrorism assistance. (Comment: Post assumes he is referring to the EACTI program announced in June 2003. End Comment.) He also cited the 2004 sanctions levied under the International Religious Freedom Act and the exclusion of Eritrea from participating in AGOA. The sanctions, he noted, were unfair because the U.S. Government does not apply such sanctions consistently across all nations. Charg responded that these sanctions and programs should be viewed in the bilateral context and not in comparison with other countries. U.S. relations with each country are unique and reflect an aggregate of interests across the full bilateral relationship, as well as domestic considerations. Ghebremeskel also commented that the U.S. had historically favored Ethiopia, including identifying Ethiopia as an anchor8 state despite its own human rights problems and had portrayed both the Eritrean government and President Isaias in a negative light, most recently in A/S Frazer's July 11 testimony to Congress.

Discussion of Border Issues

18. (C) Ghebremeskel noted that border demarcation remains of paramount importance to the Eritreans. He reiterated the complaint that the U.S. position favors Ethiopia, averring that the U.S. has done little to address the issue in the past three years. He referred to the sum of previous UN envoy Axworthy's efforts as &delaying tactics8 in favor of the Ethiopians and noted that General Fulford was on record as discussing changing the border lines with the EEBC. He added that the Eritrean government had sent a letter to President Bush and &others8 in the U.S. government

following Ethiopia,s refusal of the demarcation decision and had never received a response. In a familiar refrain, he noted that the U.S. could make the Ethiopians comply with the boundary decision, if it chose to do so.

¶8. (C) Charg stated that the U.S. has always expressed backing for the EEBC decision and strongly supports a final demarcation. U.S. interest clearly lies in a peaceful, stable Horn of Africa with good bilateral relations with all countries and between those countries. U.S. relations with Ethiopia and Eritrea should not be viewed as a zero sum game, a point to which Ghebremeskel agreed. Logically then, the U.S. and Eritrea share a mutual interest in not only demarcation but the eventual reestablishment of cordial relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which will necessitate engagement between the two countries at some juncture in the future. The Charg added that the Eritreans need to bear in mind that the U.S. is supporting a UN, not a U.S., effort. The contesting parties, i.e. Ethiopia and Eritrea, have to be willing to remain engaged for a solution to work. In terms of the current U.S.-Eritrean bilateral relationship, though, the GSE,s single-minded focus on the border demarcation and reticence in engaging the U.S. in other areas is unhelpful, and is fueling perceptions that the GSE does not want a cooperative relationship.

Somalia and Regional Concerns

¶9. (C) Charg noted that the lack of open communication with the GSE is also fueling concerns about Eritrea,s intentions in the region, especially Somalia but also vis-a-vis Darfur. She referred to recent press reports alleging Eritrean material and troop support to the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) in contravention of the arms embargo and inquired why

Eritrea does not support an IGAD peace-keeping force. Ghebremeskel noted that the Eritrean position on Somalia was misunderstood by the U.S. First, Eritrea,s perspective differs from the U.S.; Eritrea does not see Somalia as the next Afghanistan. Secondly, he said there is no evidence to show that Eritrea is supporting the UIC and countered that he had read press reports in the spring alleging U.S. support to Somali warlords. (Comment: Touch. End Comment.) Regarding IGAD, Ghebremeskel added that not only Eritrea, but few of the IGAD countries agree on whether to send in a peace-keeping force. The Eritreans have concerns about an IGAD force,s capabilities to conduct such a mission and about its purpose, which in their view, is only for the protection of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). &And, what is the TFG really?,8 he asked. The Courts are at least bringing a semblance of order to the country.

¶10. (C) Charg responded that the U.S. does not see Somalia as a replica of Afghanistan, but certainly has serious concerns about extremist elements in the UIC, including known terrorists with ties to Al-Qaeda. She noted that the U.S. supports talks between the UIC and the TFG, and established the Somalia Contact Group to this purpose. Eritrea should be cognizant of the legitimate concerns of the U.S. regarding the role of extremist elements like Sheikh Hasan Aweys within the UIC.

¶11. (C) Comment: While Ghebremeskel covered familiar ground in the substance of discussions, the mere fact that the Eritreans initiated the meeting represents one of the few positive actions by the GSE in months. Charg encouraged Ghebremeskel to look first at expanding dialogue on these topics through our respective Embassies and for the Eritreans to use UNGA as an opportunity to discuss a proposal for higher level engagement with AF bureau officials. Certainly any consideration for higher level meetings in Washington should be predicated first on the tenor of the conversation between the Secretary and President Isaias and a clear willingness by the Eritreans to discuss not only the border but also the broader bilateral relationship. Post would appreciate guidance from AF on responding to the request for

high-level meetings in Washington. End Comment.
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